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NO. 2.

PIONEERS
OF
CIVILIZATION IN ILLINOIS

EVARTS B. GREENE

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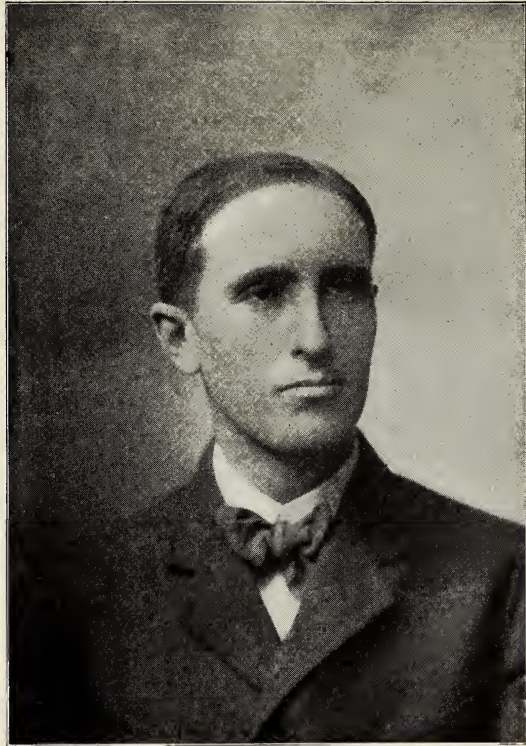
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EVARTS BOUTELL GREENE, Ph. D.

PIONEERS
OF
CIVILIZATION IN ILLINOIS

AN ADDRESS BY

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IN THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

Before the Trustees, Faculty, and Students
of the
Western Illinois State Normal School

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PIONEERS OF CIVILIZATION IN ILLINOIS

Eighty-nine years ago today, President Monroe signed the joint declaration of "the Senate and the House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled, that the State of Illinois shall be one and is hereby declared to be one of the United States of America, and admitted into the Union on an equal footing with the original states in all respects whatever." After years of tutelage, of training in partial self-government, the commonwealth of Illinois had at last attained its political majority and stood full armed among the sisterhood of states.

On this anniversary day, it would be natural and appropriate to think of the year 1818 as the conclusion of a long and typically American evolution. The broad outlines of the story have been often drawn. The first chapter of French occupation begins with the voyage of Joliet and Marquette in 1673, and closes in 1765 when the British flag first rose above the walls of Fort Chartres. Then comes the British dominion ending with the dramatic story of Clark's conquest in 1778. Finally, in the third chapter, we have the coming of the Anglo-American pioneers, the gradual displacement of the Indians, and the development from military to representative government till, in 1818, the frontier commonwealth was ready for full membership in the Union.

Today, however, let us think of that memorable third of December as a beginning, rather than an ending. Let us turn from the backwoodsmen, whose work was nearly done, to the new pioneers whose work was just beginning,—the pioneers of a finer and more ideal civilization. Of the many who deserve such recognition we may select three typical figures, each representing a distinct element in our early population: Morris Birkbeck, an English emigrant farmer and founder of the English colony in Edwards county; Edward Coles, a Virginia gentleman of the old school; John M. Peck, a Yankee Baptist preacher, a missionary not of religion only, but of education and social

justice. All these men came to Illinois in the years between 1817 and 1821, bringing to their new home matured convictions on public questions, an intense public spirit and devoted loyalty to high ideals.

Let us try now to picture to ourselves in outline the life of this young commonwealth as these men found it. First of all, they were coming to the extreme outpost of civilization in the Northwest. Iowa on the west and Wisconsin on the north were scarcely touched by white settlers, and nearly thirty years went by before either was ripe for statehood. Steamboats were only beginning to ply on western rivers, and even as late as 1837 it required from twelve to fifteen days to go from New York to St. Louis by way of Philadelphia, Pittsburg, and the Ohio river. So far as real intellectual intercourse was concerned, Illinois was much farther from New York than San Francisco is to day from London.

In this frontier state there were living in 1820 some 54,000 whites and about 1500 negroes, chiefly indented servants or slaves, a total somewhat less than the population of Peoria in 1900. Nearly all of them lived in the southern third of the present State: in 1818 the three northern counties were Madison, Bond, and Crawford, each of which extended northward to the state line. Crawford county, covering the whole northeastern section of the State and including more than thirty of our present counties, had, in 1818 less than 1000 white inhabitants. Even in southern Illinois the course of settlement clung pretty closely to the Mississippi on the one side and the Ohio and Wabash on the other, leaving sparsely settled interior counties where one might travel for days through almost unbroken wilderness.

Of these 55,000 people nearly all were comparatively recent comers from the older states of the American Union. Probably less than one-fourth of those who were counted in 1820 had lived in the State more than five years. The French population, extending from Randolph north to Madison county, had been completely overshadowed by the recent immigration, though they gave a distinct and attractive social color to these Mississippi counties, especially to Kaskaskia, the first

State capital. Illiterate, unprogressive as they were, they could give lessons in the social graces to most of their American neighbors. Governor Ford notes it as a "remarkable fact that the roughest hunter and boatman among them could at any-time appear in a ball-room or other polite and gay assembly with the carriage and behavior of a well-bred gentleman." Of the few Frenchmen who gained political recognition from their fellow citizens the most prominent was Pierre Menard, the first lieutenant governor of the State, not a descendant of the old French stock, but a later emigrant from Canada.

The distinctly American population had come mainly from the border states of the south and southwest. This familiar fact is, however, often misunderstood. The South from which most of these early settlers came was not the historic South of the tidewater region. Generally speaking, they were neither slave-holding aristocrats nor "poor white trash", though both these classes were represented in Illinois. This vanguard of western colonization consisted, in the main, of that middle group of small farmers which is so often forgotten, but which, after all, formed a large part of the southern armies from 1861 to 1865, and which today, under such leaders as Senator Tillman, has won its fight for political recognition. Many of them had felt keenly the depressing influence of slavery at home and were glad to leave it behind them. Many of them, in 1824, combined with their northern neighbors to prevent the legalization of slavery in Illinois, not for love of the negro, but in defense of free white labor. It was only by a genuine psychological revolution after four years of civil war, that they were brought to recognize the negro as a citizen. For the present Illinois was in the fullest sense, by law as well as custom, a white man's state.

Pioneers themselves, they came generally of pioneer stock. For many of them the coming to Illinois was not the leaving of one permanent home for another, but rather one more stage in a restless westward movement. As Birkbeck wrote in 1817, "Old America seems to be breaking up and moving westward". One generation had perhaps crossed

the Atlantic with the great stream of Scotch-Irish immigration. From Philadelphia they had pushed on to the slopes of the mountains. A little later they, or their children, had moved northward into the "Great Valley of Virginia", or the back country of the Carolinas. In the revolutionary time and later they helped to make the pioneer commonwealths of Kentucky and Tennessee. The case of John Reynolds may be taken as typical. His parents came from Ireland to Pennsylvania where he was born; but he grew up in Tennessee, and came in early manhood to Illinois where he rose to prominence, first as governor and later as representative in Congress. Woods, an English traveler, who visited Illinois in 1820, gives from his acquaintance some amusing instances of such pioneer families: "A man who boarded a short time at my house said he was born in Old Virginia; that he removed, with his father, over the mountains into New Virginia, but left his father before he was twenty; that he married, and took up his abode in the wild parts of South Carolina, and built a cabin, the first in that part of Carolina. People settling around him, he sold his land, and removed into Kentucky; and on the land he disposed of in Carolina, a town soon sprang up of 300 houses and seven large stores. In Kentucky he staid some years; but settlers arriving and seating themselves near him, he again moved off into the wild part of Indiana, near Rockport, where he now resides; but expressed a wish to come into Illinois as, he said, the country around him was not healthy for cattle.

"A person who lives in Birks' Prairie, who has been there four years, and who has planted a small orchard, had a few apples last year, the first he ever grew, although he had planted six orchards before the present one. His wife says she has had twelve children but never had two born in one house; and does not remember how many houses they have inhabited since they were married; yet they think they are now fixed for life; but several of their sons are gone to the Red River, 700 miles to the southwest."

The inevitable isolation of frontier life, continued from generation to generation, undoubtedly developed some ad-

mirable qualities: Physical courage, self-reliance, a virile democratic spirit,—these are repeatedly noted by foreign travelers. Nevertheless this constant movement from place to place interfered seriously with the normal process of education by which each new generation inherits and makes its own the achievements of those that have gone before. It was not only formal education that was lacking. The civilizing influence of commerce was hardly felt at all in these frontier villages. There was a small trade with St. Louis and New Orleans, and there were a few important commercial families like the Morrisons at Kaskaskia. In the main, however, the family unit was economically independent. The family clothing was almost wholly homespun, and the market for surplus products was very small. Patterson, writing of early days in southern Illinois, tells of many of his neighbors living a whole year without the possession or use of fifty dollars in cash.

In the pioneer period of the Atlantic seaboard, the church had been a powerful social and intellectual force. The Puritan meeting house was the social and intellectual, as well as the religious center of the New England town; in the South too, the clergymen, who were to a considerable extent the teachers also, were often men of university training. The earliest religious guides of the western frontier were generally men of a different type, standing often on an intellectual level little above that of their hearers. We ought not to depreciate the great work done by the traveling preachers; for they attracted audiences which could hardly have been touched by the quieter and more intellectual kinds of religious teaching. Nevertheless the coming and going of such men can hardly be compared with the steady civilizing influence of organized churches and an educated ministry. It is against such a background as this that we must set our pioneers of civilization, if we are to understand the obstacles they had to overcome and the real meaning of their work.

Morris Birkbeck's career in Illinois began in the summer of 1817 when he, with his friend George Flower, selected

the site of their future English settlement in Edwards county; and the colony was definitely established during the spring and summer of 1818 while the people of Illinois were forming their first state constitution.

Birkbeck was the son of an English Quaker preacher, and when he came to Illinois was over fifty years old and a widower with a considerable family. He had his early struggle with poverty, but gradually rose to the position of a prosperous leasehold farmer at Wanborough, a village in the county of Surrey. He had a strong taste for scientific studies and made for himself an enviable reputation as an agricultural expert. His interests were, however, by no means confined to agriculture. He had had solid training in Latin, knew some Greek, and in later life acquired a good reading knowledge of French. His writings show also serious and independent thinking on religious and political subjects. As he grew older, he gradually drifted away from the Society of Friends in which he was brought up, but though his enemies denounced him as an infidel, the charge was certainly unjust. Birkbeck's political views were also radical. He left England fifteen years before the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, at a time when political power was almost wholly in the hands of the landed aristocracy, but he was himself a strong believer in democratic institutions.

At the close of the Napoleonic wars Birkbeck spent several months travelling through France, and showed his usual independence by avoiding the conventional routes of the tourist and making careful studies of rural life. On his return he printed his *Notes on a Tour in France*, which passed through five editions in about three years, and found its way into the private library of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello.

Perhaps the most distinct portrait of Birkbeck that has come down to us is that drawn by his associate, George Flower, in his "History of the English Settlement in Edwards County."

"When I first became acquainted with Birkbeck he was nearly fifty years of age, enjoying excellent health. Mental and bodily activity were combined with unimpaired

habits. In person he was below middle stature—rather small, spare, not fleshy, but muscular and wiry. With a constitution not of the strongest, he was yet a strong and active man. His bodily frame was strengthened and seasoned by early labor and horseback exercise in the open air, which, from the nature of his business, was necessary to its supervision. He was capable of undergoing great fatigue and of enduring fatigue without injury. His complexion was bronzed from exposure; face marked with many lines; rather sharp features, lighted by a quick twinkling eye; and rapid utterance. He was originally of an irascible temper, which was subdued by his Quaker breeding, and kept under control by watchfulness and care. But eye, voice, and action would occasionally betray the spirit-work within. Mr. Birkbeck when I first became acquainted with him was a widower. When no friend was with him he would sometimes sit for hours in the afternoon, by his fire in the dining room, his only companions a long stemmed pipe and a glass of water on the table beside him.

“The little artificial thirst, occasioned by smoking, when habitually allayed by mixed liquors, or anything stronger than water, he thought had betrayed into habits of intemperance, unsuspectingly, more individuals than any other single cause. A leisurely walk around the premises, an observation on anything out of place, with directions for the coming labor of tomorrow, generally closed the day’s business with him. At tea he again joined the family circle, enjoyed the exhilarating refreshment, and the abandonment of all business cares.

“If Mr. Birkbeck was absent from the family party in the drawing room,—and sometimes he was so,—even when his house was full of visitors, he was sure to be found in a small study, a little room peculiarly his own trying some chemical experiment, or analyzing some earth or new fossil that he picked up in his morning ramble in his chalk quarries.”

This pleasant scene of English country life was disturbed by the agricultural depression prevailing in England after the long continental wars. The lease of Birkbeck’s farm was

about to expire and he felt some anxiety as to his own future and that of his family. At the same time two incidents occurred which turned his attention strongly toward America. One was the visit of Edward Coles, the future governor, who had already become interested in Illinois; and the other was the American journey of his friend Richard Flower, during the year 1816. The reasons for Birkbeck's final decision to leave England are best told in his own words and he doubtless spoke for many others of his class:

“Before I enter on these new cares and toils I must take a parting glance at those I have left behind; and they are of a nature unhappily too familiar to a large portion of my countrymen to require description.

“How many are there who, having capitals in business which would be equal to their support at simple interest, are submitting to privations under the name of economy which are near akin to the sufferings of poverty; and denying themselves the very comforts of life to escape taxation; and yet their difficulties increase, their capitals moulder away, and the resources fail on which they had relied for the future establishment of their families.

“A nation with half its population supported by alms, or poor-rates, and one-fourth of its income derived from taxes, many of which are dried up in their sources, or speedily becoming so, must teem with emigrants from one end to the other; and for such as myself, who have had ‘nothing to do with the laws but to obey them’, it is quite reasonable and just to secure a timely retreat from the approaching crisis, either of anarchy or despotism.

“An English farmer, to which class I had the honor to belong, is in possession of the same rights and privileges with the villeins of old time, and exhibits for the most part, a suitable political character. He has no voice in the appointment of the legislature unless he happen to possess a freehold of forty shillings a year, and he is then expected to vote in the interest of his landlord. He has no concern with public affairs excepting as a tax payer, a parish officer, or a militia man. He has no right to appear at a county meeting, unless the

word inhabitant should find its way into the sheriff's invitation; in this case he may show his face among the nobility, clergy, and freeholders,—a felicity which once occurred to myself, when the inhabitants of Surrey were invited to assist the gentry in crying down the Income Tax.

“Thus having no elective franchise, an English farmer can scarcely be said to have a political existence, and political duties he has none, except such as under existing circumstances would inevitably consign him to the special guardianship of the Secretary of State for the home department.

“In exchanging the condition of an English farmer for that of an American proprietor, I expect to suffer many inconveniences; but I am willing to make a great sacrifice of present ease, were it merely for the sake of obtaining in the decline of life, an exemption from that wearisome solicitude about pecuniary affairs, from which, even the affluent find no refuge in England; and for my children a career of enterprise and wholesome family connections in a society whose institutions are favorable to virtue; and at last the consolation of leaving them efficient members of a flourishing public spirited, energetic community, where the insolence of wealth and the servility of pauperism, between which in England there is scarcely an interval remaining, are alike unknown.”

In selecting his future home Birkbeck was influenced first by climatic reasons which led him to prefer the region west of the Alleghenies and south of the Great Lakes. On the other hand, he excluded the south and the southwest because they were tainted with slavery. “If political liberty be so precious that to obtain it I can forego the well-earned comforts of an English home, it must not be to degrade myself and corrupt my children by the practice of slave-keeping”.

In the spring of 1817 he took ship with several of his family for Richmond, Virginia, where he was joined by his friend Richard Flower. A few days later the whole company began their long westward journey. The journey from Richmond to Pittsburg was made partly by stage coach,

partly by steamboat on the Potomac, and for a considerable part of the distance on foot. Arrived at Pittsburg, Birkbeck wrote: "We have now fairly turned our backs on the old world and find ourselves in the very stream of emigration. Old America seems to be breaking up and moving westward".

At Pittsburg they had their choice of land and water routes to the Illinois country, but finally decided in favor of the horseback journey with its better opportunity for seeing the country. Leaving Pittsburg early in June and proceeding by leisurely stages through Chillicothe, Cincinnati, and Vincennes, they reached Shawneetown on the second of August. To Birkbeck, Shawneetown seemed "a phenomenon evincing the pertinacious adhesion of the human animal to the spot where it has once fixed itself. As the lava of Mt. *Ætna* cannot dislodge this strange being from the cities which have been ravished by its eruptions, so the Ohio with its annual overflowings is unable to wash away the inhabitants of Shawneetown."

On this long journey Birkbeck found much to criticise, but much also to admire. The lack of regard for cleanliness, a sort of "slouchiness" as a modern critic has put it, seemed to him a national vice; but in more than one instance he speaks of the American frontiersman as improving on longer acquaintance. He believed that though in the same social class with the English peasantry, they showed clear superiority in their "manners and morals and especially in their proud independence of mind."

This is not the place for describing at length the fortunes of the English colony in their new home in Edwards county. We are most interested in the whole-hearted spirit in which its leaders gave themselves to the service of their adopted state. For several years, Birkbeck devoted much of his energy to the work of attracting settlers to Illinois. He wrote frequent letters to his friends in England, many of which were printed. His enthusiasm drew upon him the attacks of William Cobbett, a well known English journalist, who had spent a year in the United States, and there

were other critics who agreed with Cobbett that Birkbeck's description was too highly colored and calculated to deceive the unsuspecting English emigrant. To these attacks Birkbeck and Flower replied in a series of vigorous pamphlets now much sought after by students of western history.

Birkbeck died only nine years after coming to Illinois, but in that brief period he left his impress clearly upon the life of the State. It is interesting, in these days of scientific agriculture, to remember that Birkbeck was one of the pioneers in this field, becoming the first president of the Illinois Agricultural Society.

The crowning event, however, of his whole career was his vigorous championship of the cause of free labor in the slavery contest of 1822-24. Over the signature of Jonathan Freeman he contributed to the Illinois Gazette a series of vigorous letters pointing out the injury which slavery would inflict, not only upon the negro, but upon the white man as well. In the midst of the contest to determine whether a convention should be held to amend the Constitution in the interest of slavery, he published his eloquent "Appeal to the People of Illinois" which has been reprinted by the Illinois State Historical Society in its Transactions for 1905. After the contest had ended in the defeat of the convention party, Birkbeck's services were recognized by his appointment as secretary of state, though the proslavery interests were still strong enough to prevent his confirmation.

In this momentous conflict between freedom and slavery, Birkbeck was brought into close relations with another leader in the same cause, the most attractive figure among all our early governors. Edward Coles, second governor of Illinois, was born in Albemarle county, Virginia, the county from which Thomas Jefferson went to his memorable service in the Continental Congress and to which he retired in the last years of his life. The early life of Edward Coles connected him closely with the historic families of old Virginia. Like his distinguished neighbor, he became a student of William and Mary College; but a broader experience came in 1809 when Madison, just beginning a troubled term as

president, appointed young Coles as his private secretary. Evidently the secretary's work was well done, for in 1816 he was sent by Madison on a special mission to St. Petersburg.

For many years, however, Coles had been troubled by a serious ethical problem. Like Jefferson and the other great Virginians, he was a slaveholder and, like many of them, he found it hard to reconcile slavery with the revolutionary doctrine of the "rights of man." In 1814 he began a correspondence with Jefferson urging him to take up the cause of gradual emancipation in Virginia. Jefferson expressed his sympathy, but could do little more. With Coles, however, the ideal maxims of the Jeffersonian creed were things to be taken in deadly earnest. Unable to screen himself from "the peltings and upbraidings of my conscience, and the just censure, as I conceived, of earth and heaven", he "determined that I would not and could not hold my fellow man as a slave". He was equally resolved not to live in a slave-holding community.

After two preliminary visits, he completed his plans for removal to Illinois, and in 1819 embarked on the Ohio river with his negroes, to each of whom he gave, during the voyage, a certificate of emancipation. Coles came to Illinois as register of the federal land office at Edwardsville, and soon became a leading figure in politics. Three years after his coming he became a candidate for the governorship and through the failure of the proslavery forces to act together, was finally elected. At the same election, however, a proslavery legislature was chosen which passed the well known resolution for a constitutional convention in the interest of slavery. In this struggle for liberty Coles showed himself throughout an aggressive and skilful leader. He spent his own money freely for the cause and was also able to secure funds from influential friends outside the State. He showed too that he was willing to sacrifice personal popularity. His house was attacked by a mob and, after his term of office closed, he was subjected to petty legal persecution on account of irregularities in his method of emancipating his own slaves.

With all the credit due to Coles and Birkbeck, it is doubtful

whether the fight could have been won without the equally efficient work of another ally, the Baptist preacher, John Mason Peck. In some respects a less dramatic figure than either Birkbeck or Coles, his total contribution to the life of the State was probably greater than that of either. In Birkbeck and Coles the mother country and the "Old Dominion" made their finest contributions to the life of the new state. Peck, on the other hand, stands in a broad way for New England ideals in politics, education, and religion. A Connecticut Yankee by birth, he was ordained in 1813 as a Baptist minister in New York. Four years later he came to St. Louis and in 1821 he established himself at Rock Spring, St. Clair County, Illinois. For the next thirty years he was beyond question one of the strongest forces for intelligence and righteousness in the whole Mississippi Valley.

His primary mission in Illinois was religious. As a Baptist minister he was the founder and adviser of churches in Illinois and Missouri. He was also the agent of the Bible Society and one of the most zealous promoters of Sunday Schools. For all these things he deserves to be gratefully remembered, not only by his fellow Baptists, but by Christians of every name.

Throughout his career, however, Peck showed himself to be a man of the broadest interests. In the educational field also he was a pioneer. Out of the seminary which he founded at Rock Spring grew Shurtleff College one of the first three colleges chartered by the legislature of Illinois.

The student of western history has also reasons of his own for holding Peck in grateful remembrance. From 1831 to 1848 he published a series of "Gazeteers" and "Emigrant's Guides" which are among our most useful and trustworthy sources of information. Writing with genuine enthusiasm for the resources of his adopted state, he also took the greatest pains to give his readers an accurate view of things as they were, and his scholarly qualities soon gained him a wider reputation. In 1850 he prepared the revised edition of Perkins' Annals of the West, and Jared Sparks selected him to write the life of Daniel Boone in his American Biography.

Peck's part in the anti-slavery struggle of 1822-24 was recognized as of the greatest importance by friends and enemies alike. As agent of the Bible Society he had unusual opportunities for meeting people in various parts of the State. He was also active in the organization of anti-slavery societies. John Reynolds, who was one of the leaders of the proslavery party, was much impressed by Peck's capacity for organization and said of him many years after that he "performed his part with the tact and talent of an experienced general." Reynolds is not always a safe guide for the student of Illinois history, but his testimony on this point is supported by other evidence and we may well agree with his final estimate of Peck's work in Illinois that "he has as much, and perhaps more, than any other man in the State made that lasting and solid impression of morality, religion, and order in the people of the State that Illinois so eminently enjoys today."

Peck was far more fortunate than either Birkbeck or Coles in the recognition which came to him in his own lifetime. Birkbeck died in 1825, the object of bitter hostility on the part of the proslavery leaders who had their revenge in defeating his confirmation for the office of secretary of state, to which he had been appointed by his friend, Governor Coles. Coles also had sacrificed his political future by his course in the governorship and a few years later he left Illinois, after some contemptible persecution at the hands of his political enemies. Peck, on the other hand, outlived the partisan animosities of that critical period and in his last years won the cordial recognition even of his former opponents.

Throughout his mature life Peck was distinctively a western man, but it is pleasant in the midst of much sectional jealousy to remember that he received finally the recognition of our oldest American university. The Harvard commencement of 1852 was a memorable occasion. The president of the college was Jared Sparks, one of our foremost American historians, to whose American Biography Peck had contributed the volume on Daniel Boone. One of

those who received the degree of Doctor of Laws at this time was Francis Wayland, president of Brown University and one of the ablest college presidents of the day, a worthy contemporary of Mark Hopkins of Williams College. Then came two of the greatest names in the history of the American Bar, Caleb Cushing, soon to become attorney general of the United States, and Benjamin R. Curtis who five years later, as Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States gave the great dissenting opinion against Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott case. There were also two distinguished Europeans, Alexis de Toqueville, author of Democracy in America, and Guizot the historian, who had also been one of the most influential French statesmen of the nineteenth century. The five who received the degree of S. T. D. were all men of real distinction; and one of them, side by side with Andrew P. Peabody and Horace Bushnell, was our own pioneer preacher, John Mason Peck.

These three men, Birkbeck, Coles, and Peck, came to Illinois at a time when, with all its natural resources, it was poor in many of the essentials of civilization, and when many of its leaders were ready to make the fatal mistake of discouraging free labor by legalizing slavery. Between 1820 and 1830 these men, and others like them, laid the foundations for what is best in our social order. Educated men themselves, they set new standards for civic leadership. Their sensitive jealousy for human rights, their high sense of spiritual and ethical values, and their constant appeal to the intelligence, rather than the prejudices of the average man won the day for freedom in 1824, and laid the foundations for sounder and more intelligent citizenship.

In these days, when the captains of industry are looming large on our social horizon, and the temptations of material success are making it difficult to find young men for some of the highest forms of social service, can we not do something to restore a sounder balance by remembering more often than we do these men who sacrificed personal profit and popularity in answer to the call of social service?

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